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PHILANTHROPY

Decisions, Decisions

PHILANTHROPY IS A THOUGHTFUL PROCESS FOR BOTH GIVER AND RECEIVER



BY JEFFREY R. PICKERING

In August, an anonymous opinion was published in *The Chronicle of Philanthropy* under the headline “My Nonprofit Was Ghosted by MacKenzie Scott. It Still Haunts Me.” The column was written from the perspective of the former executive director of a nonprofit charitable organization who

was contacted by an intermediary gathering information about her charity, presumably under consideration by Scott for a charitable contribution through her initiative Yield Giving. The contribution never materialized, and the former executive director used her opinion column to convey her disappointment and criticize

Scott’s process that left her feeling “ghosted.”

In case you are unfamiliar with Scott’s philanthropy, it is part of a movement called the Giving Pledge, wherein generous people commit to giving the bulk of their wealth to charitable causes, either during their lifetimes or through their wills. It is an

unprecedented act of collective generosity that will be transformational for its beneficiaries and will continue to pay dividends for generations to come.

As for which side of the great beyond Scott's philanthropy will fall on, she is squarely in the "giving while living" camp. To do so effectively, she established Yield Giving as a vehicle to distribute her financial fortune. It is named for a belief in adding value by giving up control. As I write, Yield Giving's network of staff and advisors has distributed over \$17.3 billion to more than 2,300 charities to use at their discretion for the benefit of others.

Yield Giving's grants are

certain to come with an abundance of messages of congratulations for the recipients. I am also certain, however, that there is plenty of disappointment among the charities whose applications for funding were unsuccessful. Sometimes this disappointment is taken in stride, but other times it is expressed in opinions like the one published by *The Chronicle*.

It is a similar message to ones I have received on more than one occasion after notifying a local charity that its funding request to the Indian River Community Foundation was declined. While not explicitly detailed in my job description as the Community Foundation's CEO, this "other



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Last year, more than \$557 billion was given to charities in the United States.

duty as assigned” of delivering bad news to an otherwise worthy charitable cause is not one of the more pleasant ones I carry out. Of course, there are always legitimate reasons, including the limited availability of dollars to be distributed. Nevertheless, nobody likes to lose, so I can understand the disappointment.

For the better part of the last 20 years, I have served as a trusted advisor to some of

the country’s most generous philanthropists who use community foundations to carry out their charitable giving. For the 10 years prior, I raised money for a public charity that provides temporary shelter and recuperative care to homeless people following a hospital discharge. Each role has been rewarding and challenging, giving me a point of view that both grantmaking and fundraising are hard

work, often without a guarantee of success.

As a philanthropic advisor, I tell my clients that donating significant dollars to charity is one of the riskiest things they can do with their money. Doing so without sufficient due diligence can lead to disappointment for the donor and sometimes even adverse outcomes for the charity.

In order to increase the likelihood that your hard-earned dollars will be used effectively, I encourage you to consider important characteristics, including a charity’s governance, management, financial position, and program results. Sometimes this provides sufficient reason to

give confidently, and other times more information or perspective is needed.

I encourage my clients to limit the administrative burden on the charity they are considering, but sometimes these engagements take on a life of their own. After this due diligence, usually some sort of financial contribution results, but occasionally a decision is made not to fund.

From the charitable perspective, however, expecting success from one cultivation or engagement with a philanthropist is equally risky. Considering the stubborn statistic that giving in America has been stuck at roughly 2 percent of GDP for more than

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50 years, and that 40 percent of American households don't give a penny to charity, the odds of hitting a home run with one donor are low.

If you are involved with fundraising for a local charity, either as paid staff or in a volunteer capacity, instead of expressing dismay when a donor decides not to give, I encourage you to quickly evaluate what worked and what might have been improved in the cultivation process and adjust accordingly. If the engagement with one donor presented a disproportionate administrative burden, consider preparations that may be done in advance to have information



Billionaire MacKenzie Scott has established an initiative called Yield Giving, which has given away more than \$17 billion of her personal wealth to charities that help those in need.



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Summer may be ending, but Hunger will continue unless we work together to provide access to food through the new school year. Will you help?



INDIAN RIVER INSIGHTS

Forty percent of American households don't give to charity.



readily available, especially for small charities with limited development staff.

For example, maintain a platinum level GuideStar profile and use it as a handy tool in the cultivation process. Use your judgment based on publicly available information about the prospective donor and trust your gut to determine if a cultivation is going the right way or not. If it sounds too good to be true, it probably is.

For the better part of the last year, landing a whale of a gift from a donor like MacKenzie Scott has been a fun dream to ponder for many charities. Most of us got into the nonprofit sector to help



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people, so who wouldn't be excited by the idea of receiving such a transformative gift?

Time, resources, and emotional energy might be better spent, however, on keeping one's head down and focused on a process-driven fundraising plan that spreads the risk and provides many more opportunities to experience incremental success. Veteran fundraising consultant Ron Rescigno offers many easy-to-implement strategies in his book *The Process-Driven Annual Fund*. So does Rachel Ramjattan in *No More Duct Tape Fundraising*.

Whatever the development strategy, keep a positive mindset and remember the most important reasons why generous people give.

Last year, more than \$557 billion was given to charities in the United States. Most of it came from individual donors, either as outright gifts or bequests, motivated not by the promise of a tax deduction but in most cases by something more inspirational, as articulated in this excerpt from Scott's letter to join the Giving Pledge:

Thinking about the Giving Pledge, my mind kept searching its folds for a passage I once read about writing, something about not saving our best ideas for later chapters, about using them now.

*I found it this morning on a shelf of my books from college, toward the end of Annie Dillard's *The Writing Life*.*

Do not hoard what seems good for a later place in the

book, or for another book.... The impulse to save something good for a better place later is the signal to spend it now. Something more will arise for later, something better.... Anything you do not give freely and abundantly becomes lost to you. You open your safe and find ashes.

We each come by the gifts we have to offer by an infinite series of influences and lucky breaks we can never fully understand. My approach to philanthropy will continue to be thoughtful.

It will take time and effort and care. But I won't wait. And I will keep at it until the safe is empty.

.....
Considering the evidence, this is one "ghost" whose spirit I believe in. ✨



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